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## Cedar Chest

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# CEDAR CHEST

## VANESSA MATTFELDT

Not five minutes after waking up and I already have a pen in my hand scribbling away in the journal Dr. Wright gave me two weeks ago. It has three hundred pages, one hundred and six of which are already blackened. When Dr. Wright first gave it to me, I laughed when he said I would need a new one within a month. I thought, there is no way I can fill that many pages in such a short amount of time, but at this rate he was right. I hear Alan in the kitchen and toss my journal angrily on the bed; I woke up late. Alan knows to wake me up if the alarm doesn't. It's 6:08. I hop in the shower, acutely aware of the minutes ticking.

Bacon and scrambled eggs wait for me on the nightstand when I get out of the shower. A note sits on the tray: 'I didn't want to wake you. You looked so peaceful.' I crumple it up and toss it in the trash. I sit on the bed and try to enjoy the breakfast Alan made for me before the clock starts breathing down my neck. I meticulously crunch on my bacon, planning out the day ahead of me. I have Mrs. Price's fifth grade class coming into the library today to work on their history projects. I imagine their grubby hands defiling my books and spreading their germs across my library. I can see it now, a young Thomas or Zachary picking his nose and wiping it down the pages of one of my copies of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I would have to go over and scold him, maybe even yell a little if he didn't show signs of apology. Oh gosh, the look on his face. And Mrs. Price! What'll she think? I shudder and drop my bacon seeing the time on the clock. Alan really should have woken me.

I reach for my journal to jot down number two, but it's not where I tossed it on the bed. I jump up and throw the pillows on the floor, searching for the familiar leather cover. I rip the blankets off the bed. It has to be here, there's no way it could be anywhere else. Unless Alan moved it. I scan the room, taking in the open door to the color coded closet, the blanket my mother crocheted, the alphabetical

stack of books by the door. I let out the breath I had been holding when I spot it on the desk next to the bills. I reach for it, but stop, noticing the pen sticking out the top. I hadn't put that there. Did Alan read my journal? He knows not to even touch it and yet he moved it. The pen is stuck between pages 96 and 97. I scan what I had written thirteen hours ago, feeling the familiar tightening in my chest. I flip to page 107 and scribble down numbers two and three. I'm angry at Alan, but can't dwell on it further. I've wasted four minutes and for all I know he just moved it to make the bed. Which I now have to remake. Great.

I head out the door with nineteen minutes to get to Hale Middle School, plenty of time to spare, but I can feel the gears in my mind going and the inside of my elbows start to sweat. I lock our yellow door and make it down the driveway before throwing the car in park and hurrying back to make sure the door is actually locked. It was, as it always is. I have seventeen minutes now. I know that I'll make it to school on time, Alan and I made sure to buy a house close enough to the school for this exact reason, but two blocks away I notice that the gas pedal is pushed a little too far to the floor. I slow down and at a red light jot down number four in my journal before it turns green. The man in the truck next to me gives me a look and my tires spin when I leave the line. I watch him turn in my rearview mirror and let out the breath I was holding. I am determined to start this day off as normal as possible.

I find a parking spot and am relieved to find that most of the kids are still outside playing before classes start; I don't like having to walk through a sea of eleven through fourteen year olds. I'm always afraid I'm going to accidentally trample one or get trampled myself. Luckily, the hallways are empty. I pass the teacher's lounge where the scent of strong coffee and the booming laugh of Principal Reyes fill the hallway. I catch his eye but hurry past, afraid he'll usher me in. I make it to the library unscathed. I unlock the doors and flip on all the lights before unlocking my office door. The smell of new books wafts over me from the box behind the counter; a new shipment of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for Mr. Enebo's sixth grade class. I want to fan one before my nose, but enter my office instead and set my purse on the desk. I turn to put my lunch into the mini fridge before realizing that I didn't pack a lunch today because I thought I was going to be late.

Now I'm going to have to buy lunch from the cafeteria. I'm going to go early, so that it's not busy with kids eating their own lunches, but I have a study hall right before lunch period. Maybe I could let them out early, but then they would have nowhere to go but the cafeteria. I only have fifteen kids that period; so if I let them out sixteen minutes early they can get their lunches early and eat, giving me enough time to get food after them but before the other kids are released for lunch. Or I could just drive to the deli, but I'm only allowed thirty minutes for lunch, and if traffic is backed up, I

would only have ten minutes, maybe, to eat and get back in time for the next period. Wait! Did I even bring my wallet?

I dive for my purse and tear out my wallet, relief washing over me. I've been pacing and have lost three minutes. The bell is going to ring any minute, and I haven't gotten anything ready for the day. I storm out of the office, angry at myself for wasting precious time. I grab errant books around the library and place them on a cart, starting up the computers as I walk past. I pick up a student's notebook and remember the journal sitting in my purse. My heart is hammering in my chest and my palms are clammy. I roll the cart behind the front counter and put the notebook in the lost and found box next to the computer. The library looks clean and the computers are booting up nicely, all with two minutes to spare.

I check the doors to make sure they're open but that no one is coming into the library yet. I close my eyes like Dr. Wright told me to do and start breathing in squares; breathe, two, three, four – hold, two, three, four – relax, two, three, four. I do this until my mind is clear and I can't hear my heart in my ears anymore. I grab my journal and write in it until the bell rings and Mrs. Price's history class comes marching through my doors. I help the students log in and then walk amongst them, helping them find the right information and making sure they're not looking at anything they're not supposed to.

"Ms. Daisy?" One of the girls is waving her hand in the air, looking at me expectantly. I look around for Mrs. Price and find her helping a different student; there is no way I can get out of this one.

"Yes, Caroline?" I say, trying to keep my tone even. I start racking my brain, trying to predict what her question might be and what the appropriate response is. Oh, I hope it's not about the Civil War; I can hardly remember names and dates of that one. Boy would Mrs. Price like to hear that. I bet she would have me fired instantly. I laugh inside my mind. Why would the school librarian get fired for not knowing enough about history? Silly me.

"Ms. Daisy," Caroline says, impatience covering her tone and her eyebrows peak up on her little forehead. I realize that I have been leaning next to her for a good twenty seconds without listening.

"Oh, I'm sorry Caroline. You know me, head in the clouds." I manage a weak laugh and can see the judgment in her beady little blue eyes. All the work I put in to make these kids like me and here I go messing it up. "What was it dear?" I say, trying to keep my voice level.

She leans in close and cups her hand around her mouth. "Jacob isn't working on his project," she says. I stand back up and see the dark-haired Jacob she is talking about. His tablet is in his hands and there is a group of boys scrunched around him, trying not to be seen. I put my hand on her shoulder and then walk over, trying to build up the nerve to sound angry enough that they will listen but not

so angry that they will start to hate me. I'm about to speak when one of the boys gasps and the other whispers, "Play it again."

I open my mouth to speak when I hear the tires of a car screeching and when I look over the hunched shoulders of the boys I see a black car colliding head on with a semi. I hear the crunch of metal and can feel the tightening of the seatbelt as it tries to keep the driver back. I snatch the tablet out of the boy's hands.

"That is enough!" I yell. They turn to me, their eyes big. "You are supposed to be working on your project, not watching some sick video," I continue. I can still hear the screeching tires in my mind and the tablet shakes in my hands. "Go back to your seats, boys, and as for you, Jacob, detention." He starts to protest and I can hear Mrs. Price walking towards me. "No," I say. "I don't want to hear it, shut up." My voice is trembling and I turn on my heel and rush into my office.

I pass Mrs. Price and see angry lines creasing her forehead. Maybe they were lines of concern. No, definitely anger. I just yelled at one of her students. The tablet is still playing that damn video, and even when I turn it off it continues to play inside my mind. The crunch of metal makes my body quake like when a fork scrapes across my teeth and the rubber on wet cement doesn't help my shaking hands and the unheard scream that doesn't stop causes me to wrap my hands around my head. My heart hammers like an anvil in my chest, driving too fast for my shallow breaths to keep up. I need to go back out there, I need to address the issue with Mrs. Price, but the thought of that sends me into a downward spiral of gasping breaths that rack my body with sharp convulses, my lungs trying to get enough air.

I hear my door creak open and whip my head around, feel the splash of tears on my arm before seeing Caroline and her golden curls rush back out. I can hear the conversation now: "Mrs. Price! It's Ms. Daisy. She's *cryyyyyyyyying*." And Mrs. Price and the whole class will laugh because they have successfully done what their little hearts secretly desire to do: get under the skin of the new teacher and watch her crack. Well, good job little Jacob, I have cracked. Hope you're happy now, you little shit. I slam my fist down, angry at myself for even thinking that about a student. I hear the students start packing up even though the bell won't ring for another thirteen minutes. I should go out and tell them that I'm okay, that they don't need to leave early. I'm going to. I'm going to get up out of my chair, wipe away these stupid tears and show them that I'm okay. Because I am. I am okay. Of course I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be okay?

I sit in my chair and wait for them to leave.

I hear the last pair of little feet leave my library and it's like the elephant that has been sitting on my shoulders finally decided to get up and be productive or something. I close my eyes because the

fact that I can only see through a tunnel starts to scare me. It's quiet and I realize how loudly I've been breathing. It's painful and I want to succumb to the tears again, wash away all these feelings and be able to just lie exhausted on the floor or maybe even my bed at home. I reach out and blindly grasp my journal, holding it to my chest, pretending that it is Alan or even the blue plush pillow on Dr. Wright's cream colored couch. I pretend that none of this happened and that the car crash in my head isn't still playing. I pretend that I'm in a place where this doesn't exist, where I don't have to worry about these attacks.

Breathe, two, three, four – Hold, two, three, four – Relax, two, three, four. Breathe, two, three, four – Hold, two, three, four – Relax, two, three, four. Breathe, two, three, four --- Hold, two, three, four --- Relax, two, three, four. My ears pop and my lungs decide to start working again. I can feel dried tears on my cheek and thank god that I decided to keep an extra set of makeup supplies in my office at the beginning of the year. My hands slowly become still against my chest and I slump in my chair as I let a huge sigh escape my body; let all the anxiety flow out into the room where it will dissipate into the air like wisps of smoke. Hopefully.

I open my eyes and see everything normally. I hear Dr. Wright's calm voice in my mind reminding me to lock my worries away somewhere, in a filing cabinet or a safe or a chest. That session, immediately thought of the cedar chest my mother kept at the foot of her bed. I have used that image ever since. After pushing all the emotions of the last seven minutes down and locking them away in the cedar chest, I grab my journal and write furiously in it for three minutes, trying to stay calm but smearing the ink. I slam the journal shut and toss it in my purse. I don't want to look at it for a while. After fixing my makeup, I leave my office into the now empty library. I see traces of my class and a wave of guilt washes over me. I can't think about that right now, it's too soon.

I grab the cart and start putting the books away on their respective shelves. It calms me further, the meticulous work of organizing the books and putting the library back in order. I take solace in their smells; musty, new, sometimes like Elmer's glue. The spines are comforting. My library and my books. I put things where they belong and when they get out of place I just have to put them back, simple as that. If only life were that simple.

"Ms. Daisy?" I almost drop the book I'm holding. I hadn't heard anyone come in. I turn and see Mrs. Price.

"Yes," I say, trying not to let the lock on the cedar chest break. The scene tries to replay in my head, but I smother it down, or at least try to.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes. Fine," I say and turn back to my cart of books, placing the one I almost dropped back on

the shelf. I can't look at her when I say, "I'm sorry about earlier. I don't know what came over me." I expect her to yell, expect her to grab my arm and force me to look at the anger etched on her face and the judgment in her eyes. I raise my shoulders in defense, trying to make myself as little as possible. I hear her move closer and wait for her fingers to wrap themselves around my arm.

Mrs. Price lays her hand lightly on my shoulder. "Daisy, I'm not angry with you," she says. Her voice is soft, like she is talking to a frightened puppy or one of her students. I want to resent her for that, but I'm more annoyed at myself than anything. "I would have done the same thing," she says. "Maybe not locked myself away afterward, though." She gives a feeble laugh.

I turn to her, and her face immediately falls. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that," she says. I want to scream at her, I want to tell her how horrible she is and how I don't want her in my library anymore, but I know she's right. I can tell that she saw all of those emotions play across my face, because she's looking at me with concern. I really need to work on my poker face.

"It's alright, Mrs. Price," I say.

"Please, call me May," she says. "Daisy, I don't know what happened today, but I've talked to Principal Reyes and he agrees that you should take the rest of the day off."

I look at her in disbelief. The day off? It's not even lunch time yet. Why would she talk to the principal about this? I mean, I'm more than capable of doing that myself. The thought of doing so make my stomach roll. I shake my head, trying to figure out what I want to say next, how I want to play the next move. Maybe I should tell May. I've been trying so hard for the past six months to keep this a secret from my coworkers. I didn't want to be the outsider because of my disorder. I didn't want their pitying eyes to fall on my face every time I walked into the teacher's lounge – not that I go there very often. But as I look at May, I see those pitying eyes and realize that even though she doesn't know about my disorder, she still pities me, and even though I didn't want to be the outsider, I have become just that.

"Thank you, May," I say. She smiles at me. "It's just... I have this...." I can't get the words out. "I'm very grateful for that," I say.

She smiles once more and pats my shoulder. "I know you're still kind of new here, but I just wanted you to know that we all really care about you and think that you are a great addition to this school." I can feel my eyes getting moist. Mrs. Price reminds me so much of my mother before she passed, always looking after the people around her. She always gave the warmest hugs. "If you need anything, my door is always open." She gives me a quick hug and leaves the library. I'm grateful that she didn't pry.

I take a deep breath and finish putting the rest of the books away. I try not to think about

anything else. Once the cart is empty and the computers are turned off, I return the cart back behind the front counter and grab my things from my office. I throw my coat on and wait for the third bell to ring so I don't have to leave while the kids are switching classes. I don't want to feel their little eyes on me right now. I want to scrawl out a thank you note for Principal Reyes, but I can't face him. He's the only one who knows. It crosses my mind that he might have told May. That's something I don't want to think about just yet, so I scribble it into my journal and leave as the tardy bell rings. I rush out to my car and make it home without crying, unlock our yellow door, and barricade myself.

Alan is going to be home soon. I've meticulously cleaned the house, even dusted the corner of the living room where a dead spider hung in its cobwebs. I scrubbed the floors in the kitchen, laundry room and bathroom, washed the shower and cleaned the toilet until my hands were dry and cracked from the chemicals. I cleaned out the closet, organized the drawers, and made boxes for the donation warehouse downtown. The old leftovers in the fridge are thrown out, the kitchen is spotless except for the mess I made on the counter making the lasagna which has been in the oven for thirty-eight minutes: Alan's favorite. I've been avoiding thinking about work and the inevitable conversation Alan and I are going to have about it tonight.

I hear his car pull into the driveway and when he's walking up the stairs I throw the door open. "Hi Sweetie!" I say.

"Daisy!" he says, throwing a hand to his heart. "What are you doing home?"

"Lasagna's in the oven," I say.

"I thought you had yoga tonight." I stare at him. Of course I would forget about yoga today of all days.

"Oh," I say. "I must've forgotten." I usher him inside, taking his briefcase and coat. I direct him to the Shock Top that is waiting for him on the table.

"You never forget yoga. Did something happen today?" he says.

I continue to the closet, put his coat inside and his briefcase at the door of his office. "No," I say, my voice raising an octave on its own will. I need to work on my lying voice, too. I turn around and Alan's staring at me. I know he knows; he always does. I know he hopes one day the 'no' will be true. I walk past him into the kitchen to take out the lasagna. The cheese is browning and bubbling across the top. It was my mom's recipe. I concentrate on dinner; grabbing plates, setting the table, grabbing the bottle of Pink Moscato and pouring myself a glass. I can feel Alan watching me, can feel his hazel eyes follow my movement, gauging my emotions. He's the only one in my family who knows. He's been my support since my first attack.



“Daisy,” he says. He comes up behind me, places his hands on mine to stop them from chopping up the lettuce. I’ve minced them into tinier pieces than I intended, caught up in my thoughts. I don’t think I would have noticed if I had chopped up a finger or two. I drop the knife and lean into him, fighting the urge to cry.

“I think I’m going to get fired,” I say. He turns me around and tilts my face up. His eyes tell me to keep going but I’m not too sure about the rest of him. “I had another, Alan. In the middle of class!” I can feel the tears building behind my eyes, pressing against them like little demon feet trying to get out. “Mrs. Price told Principal Reyes, and then I just left. I didn’t say one thing, not even on a note. I should’ve talked to him about it. Explained it. I’m sure he thinks I’m crazy, maybe incompetent. I’ve been waiting for a phone call all day.”

Alan is looking at me with the same pity I saw in Mrs. Price’s eyes. I push away, expecting him to hold me back, but he doesn’t. I want to scream. “Daisy, remember the last time this happened and you had to leave,” he says. “You weren’t fired then.”

“I know, but this time it was during class,” I say. “And I yelled at a student.”

“That’s what teachers do, Daisy.”

“But I called him a little shit!” Alan tilts his head as if to say, right, like you actually did that. “Okay, so I called him a little shit in my head, but I did tell him to shut up,” I say, feeling defeated. Alan is trying to suppress a smile. “I’m not trying to be funny,” I say under my breath.

“Daisy,” he says, exasperation blanketing his voice. “You’re not going to get fired. You’re blowing this out of proportion... Again.” He walks to the table and sits down. I realize what I’ve done and grab the lasagna, setting it in front of him and taking my seat at the other end of the table. I had been trying so hard not to go on like that around him again. I made it a week. He dishes himself up while I sip my glass of wine and pull my journal towards me, opening it to page one hundred and eleven. He looks at me, holding out the spatula, but I just shake my head.

“Come on, Daisy,” he says. “You need to eat, don’t be like this.”

“I’m fine,” I say. Alan sighs, shakes his head and starts eating the lasagna I spent two hours and twenty-seven minutes preparing. I start writing in my journal, concentrating on the sound of my pen against paper and trying to ignore the sounds of chewing and sighing. Alan gets up to get another beer and I continue writing, acutely aware that my wine has grown warm.

“Daisy,” Alan says. I don’t look up. I pretend I don’t hear. I want to leave and write in the privacy of the bedroom, but know that will do more damage than good. “Daisy.” I turn the page. “Daisy, close that damn journal right now and look at me!” he says. I finish my sentence with a shaking hand and close the journal. “Look at me,” he says.

“I’m fine,” I say. “We’re fine,” I say.

“We’re not, though,” he says, setting his beer on the table hard enough that it splashes onto the placemat. “Daisy,” he says. “Daisy, talk to me instead of writing in that goddamned journal all the time.”

I get up from the table to turn off the stove, turn off the light outside, check that the yellow door is locked. Alan is still in the dining room. I pour myself another glass of wine, grab my journal and start walking to the bedroom.

“No,” he says, ripping the journal out of my hands. I drop my glass of wine onto the freshly washed carpet in my attempt to grab it from him, afraid of what he will find inside. Afraid of having him see what the blackened scrawling really says. I don’t know when I started to cry, but tears burn their way down my cheeks.

“Give it back,” I say, feeling the weight on my shoulders and in my lungs. I reach for the journal but he pulls away. I can hear the crunch of metal and screaming tires. I can smell the gasoline and the burning cheese in the oven. Alan’s face is red.

“Talk to me,” he says. He puts the journal on the table and grabs my shoulders. He wants me to look at him, stare into his eyes so he can see all the secrets I’ve been keeping. His hands don’t feel like his hands anymore; they haven’t for a couple of months now. All I want is to curl into a tight ball, get lost beneath the covers and never cross the minds of May or Principal Reyes or little Jacob ever again. “Talk to me.”

“I can’t!” I say, the little devils feet escaping the corners of my eyes. “You’re going to leave me,” I say. I wait for him to embrace me, tell me everything will be okay, pretend that tonight didn’t happen. I wait for his hands to become his hands again, his smell to be familiar once more. His hands fall to his side and he grabs my journal, holding it to his chest like I did earlier that day. It’s a wall between us, a chasm of everything he won’t let me tell him. I’m a handful, more than he bargained for. I can tell he’s trying to hide the truth, but I’m not the only one who needs to work on their poker face.

“It’s hard,” he says. “It’s hard listening to you go on and on about the same things over and over again.” I nod, thinking he is right but not knowing how to fix it. “Please don’t cry,” he says.

“I just don’t know what to do,” I say.

“I’m not leaving,” he says. “We’re going to get through this.” I let him pull me into a hug. “I’m not leaving,” he says, but I hear the lie in his voice.